

# Men from Mars and women from Mercury in Sophocles' *Electra*

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## The dysfunctional family

The cycle of vengeance which makes its way through the generations of the family of Orestes and his sister Electra forms some of the best known myths from ancient Greece. Their father Agamemnon had sacrificed their sister Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis in order to get fair winds to sail to Troy on the campaign of the Trojan War. To punish Agamemnon for this, their mother Clytemnestra slaughtered him on his return from Troy, aided by her new lover Aegisthus, who is Agamemnon's nephew. In the meantime, Orestes had been sent away from the family home to be brought up in exile for fear that he would challenge the rule of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as the legitimate male heir. For similar reasons, Electra has been kept unmarried so that she cannot produce a male heir who would cause a threat to the usurper Aegisthus. Electra spends the years wasting away as a spinster longing for her little brother Orestes to return as a man who will take revenge on the mother she hates and on the loathed Aegisthus, who dares to walk around in her father's house, sit on his throne, and wear his clothes. Ultimately Orestes does return and, on the instruction of the god Apollo, murders his mother and her lover.

## A popular story

The story of Orestes' return to his home town of Argos to commit matricide was a popular one in antiquity and there are many versions of the myth which survive. It is mentioned in Homer and there are three different tragedies from the fifth century B.C. which dramatize the myth: Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, Euripides' *Electra*, and the one which concerns us here, Sophocles' *Electra*. Although each of these plays deals with the same essential plot, each version is remarkably different in the way in which it presents the unfolding of the plot and the characters involved. One thing common to most Greek tragedies, however, including these three, is a preoccupation with the different roles of men and women in society.

## Men from Mars

Mars is the Roman equivalent of the Greek god Ares, god of war, and is a good image for capturing the male sphere of often violent action in Sophocles' *Electra* which tends to exclude emotion. There are four male characters in the play, although only three have speaking parts: Orestes, his Tutor, his best friend Pylades (who is a silent character), and Aegisthus. Each of these is characterized, in part at least, by the way in which he can be perceived as participating in the male sphere of action. The opening of the play shows that Orestes and his Tutor have the repossession of his ancestral estate as their prime concern, while reunification with Orestes' siblings appears as a secondary concern. Orestes explains the plan to feign his own death with a funerary urn allegedly containing his ashes which the Tutor will present to Clytemnestra. He ends his speech by saying that they should go to their tasks.

This sets up an association between men and action, and is immediately followed by the anguished cry of Electra ('Alas!

Woe is me, me!'), heard off-stage, consolidating the contrast between male action and female emotion. Orestes hears the cry and surmises that it is Electra. He asks his Tutor if he thinks they should stay and listen to her laments, an indication that Orestes does have at least some emotional response to Electra. 'Not at all' replies the Tutor, and here we see who is really in charge. The Tutor controls Orestes and steers him away from any emotion and on towards the path of action. This is partly why, in spite of knowing that Electra is bitterly lamenting his absence, Orestes continues to conceal his identity from her for an extraordinary length of time. We spend three quarters of the play waiting for Electra to find out that her brother has come home, and this creates a great deal of dramatic tension. We sympathize with Electra as Orestes reports the fictitious chariot race which allegedly leads to his death – a violent story of an action hero performing incredibly well in a chariot race until his chariot crashes and he is violently mangled in the reins of the horses under the wheels of the chariot. The pretence of Orestes' death is an upsetting deception for Electra who must stand by as her mother rejoices at the news.

So Orestes and his Tutor are men of action and, wherever Orestes goes, Pylades follows. What about Aegisthus? He only appears in the very final scene and is not a pleasant character. He treats Electra as if she were a worthless slave and is delighted to hear that Orestes is supposed to be dead. But is he a man of action? Interestingly he is not. In most mythological versions, Aegisthus is a weak man controlled by Clytemnestra. In Sophocles' *Electra* Clytemnestra is killed before Aegisthus comes back, so we don't get to see them together, but there is something very telling which happens at the end of the play and shows Aegisthus as not belonging to the male sphere of action.

In ancient Greek thought, the opposite of violent action is persuasive speech. Violent action is normally the sphere of men, persuasive speech the sphere of women, but occasionally there are crossovers. Clytemnestra, for example, transgressed into the male sphere of violent action when she killed Agamemnon. So also here, at the end of Sophocles' *Electra*, Aegisthus can be seen as transgressing into the female sphere by his response when he realizes that Orestes intends to kill him. First he asks for the opportunity to speak his case. He is denied this request but he then tries to persuade Orestes to go into the house first, presumably so that he can try to escape or kill Orestes himself. When that fails he tries to induce Orestes to kill him outside, but Orestes is not persuaded and insists on marching him inside to kill him at the very spot on which his father was killed.

## Women from Mercury

Mercury is the Roman equivalent of the Greek god Hermes, the Messenger god and god of persuasive speech, which, again, is a good image for capturing the female role of speech in this drama. There are three female characters in this play: Electra, her sister Chrysothemis, and their mother Clytemnestra. It is interesting to compare the attitudes of the two sisters because the character of Chrysothemis gives us something against which to measure Electra's behaviour.

Clearly there is a good reason for Electra's constant lament-

ing, but it also becomes evident that Electra is somewhat excessive. In contrast to Orestes who seems to block out emotion, Electra embraces it too much. She explains that she bleeds from self-inflicted blows of lamentation and takes a common poetic expression, such as tearing one's cheeks in grief, to violent extremes in the image of her striking her bloody chest (line 90). She is obsessed with her wretched plight and refuses any request to stop mourning.

Lamenting was the role of women in ancient Greek culture, but it seems that Electra enjoys lamenting in an unnatural way. At lines 285-6, she says 'It is not possible for me to weep as much as it brings my spirit pleasure'. She insists throughout that she is alone in lamenting for her father. Electra thus isolates herself from all around her in a fashion seen as typical of the Sophoclean hero. Yet Chrysothemis is in the same position as Electra; she is kept unmarried and is deprived of her rightful wealth. Electra claims that Chrysothemis' hate of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus is all words and no action, but, as Chrysothemis points out, as women she and Electra are powerless to take any action against them. Guided by the Chorus' response, one feels that Electra is overly harsh on Chrysothemis. Electra is so convinced of Orestes' death and is so wrapped up in her own misery that she doesn't listen to Chrysothemis' happy news that Orestes seems to have left tokens on their father's tomb.

Although Electra rejects Chrysothemis several times, she ultimately turns to her for help when she decides to venture into the male sphere of action and kill Aegisthus, since she now believes there is no hope of Orestes' return. Electra imagines that they will be celebrated for their manly courage, but this is inappropriate, and foreshadows their ultimate inability to take murderous action without the help of a man. Electra becomes mad with the lust of revenge. She cannot see, when Chrysothemis asks her, that she is a woman, not a man. Eventually, Electra's contribution to the murder will be the female function of speech in praying for success, as Orestes undertakes the active task of murdering Clytemnestra while there is no man in the house.

Clytemnestra also prays during the course of the drama, and she tries to persuade Electra that she was justified in killing Agamemnon, but her speech fails to persuade and Orestes displays little hesitation in committing matricide. This is her come-uppance for having cut down her husband Agamemnon, when she strayed into the male sphere of violent action.

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